

UNDERSTANDING NOT STRICTLY REQUIRED

PHE is back, bigger and better than ever. Niamh Lynch talks to three artists who are exhibiting in this year's event to try and gain an understanding about what has influenced their work and how important it is for the audience to comprehend the meaning in the images

Claiming to be one of the world's great visual art events takes a lot of confidence, but the people behind PHotoEspaña have every right to think big. Even though the photography festival celebrated its 10th birthday only last year, it has gone from city photo show to major arts festival, attracting more than 600,000 visitors last year and rightfully taking the title of the largest cultural event in Spain.

A chance to learn

PHotoEspaña's real attraction, however, lies in the fact that it is not just a photography exhibition. Participating photographers, members of the public and even enthusiastic amateurs will find something at PHotoEspaña that goes beyond simply looking at a picture. Photographers have the opportunity to win one of six career-boosting prizes. Amateur photographers can perfect their skills at a variety of free classes. Anybody who is interested can attend seminars, workshops, and master-classes with artists such as Simon Norfolk who, for instance, will impart his wisdom on the digital treatment of images. Even someone who is way beyond artistic help, like me (my photos look like they were taken by someone who accidentally sat on a camera phone), can pass the time attending debates, presentations, film cycle or even photomathon, a sort of artistic treasure hunt. Or, of course, you could simply take the traditional route and admire some of the hundreds of photos that make up PHotoEspaña 2008.

The camera as a tool

Just to warn you though, there's no guarantee that "just" looking will be any less challenging than learning about megapixels or running a photomathon. Listen to artist Harri Palviranta for example: "Don't judge, just give it time," is his advice about *Battered*, the collection that won him last year's *Descubrimientos* prize. The collection caused scandal in his home country of Finland for documenting a social ill that nobody wanted to talk about — alcohol-fuelled brawling. The photos are indeed shocking; an assortment of young men bleeding from various orifices after beating each other to a pulp — but that is precisely their point. As Harri explained, street fighting in Finland is common, but taboo. When it was discussed, it was in hushed, academic tones, and was kept out of the public eye. Given the context, the ground-breaking exhibition received a lot of media attention when it first opened, even leading the artist to appear on TV to discuss not his art, but the social phenomenon as a whole. This was great news for Harri, as that was precisely his aim. With a background in the social sciences, the photographer believes that a visual depiction of the unspoken issue will provoke a public debate, hopefully then leading to resolution. Harri says he sees his camera as a tool — "like a pen is for a writer" — for doing a job, in his case, helping



A vision of the environment

Photo: José Ramón Ais

Antía Moure's only techniques are "intuition" and a "fistful of crayons"

to right some of Finland's wrongs. Even though he uses a variety of photographic techniques for some of his other collections, *Battered* has a distinctly documentary feel. The men in his photos aren't drunken, red-faced louts; they are fresh-faced lads incongruously bleeding on street corners. Some look so respectable that they could well be your cousin. The humanity/inhumanity juxtaposition makes you think — and that's precisely what Harri is after.

Not as beautiful as it seems

While Harri is still basking in last year's win, José Ramón Ais, a Basque photographer, is among this year's hopefuls. By his own admission, he isn't looking to tell a story or document a phenomenon; he even told me that he doesn't actually know what he wants to achieve! He photographs, he says, to produce "a vision of an environment", applying cool techniques and experimental approaches until he produces a photo he likes. His collection *Picturesque* doesn't contain people or situations, but modified traditional landscapes that on first glance look like 17th-century romantic paintings. They seem like calming idylls, composed largely of lush vegetation, green trees and mysterious mountain paths. Such perfection can get a bit monotonous after a while, but that is exactly what José is examining. His hook lies in the atmosphere, rather than the subject, of the photo. After a while spent looking at the perfect scene before you, you become aware of the "Jaws effect" — there's something in the water! His love of the latent threat and the unsettling perfection is strongly influenced by his love for cinematography. He has worked on several films and soundtracks, and uses elements from all of these interests to create his photos. Starting with the basic subject, usually a wooded scene or single tree, José gradually modifies his photo, using blue backgrounds, special effects such as watering-can rain, and computer retouching, to produce the final, highly finished piece. His photography, he says, is "the product of

many techniques" and his particular interest in decorative music for soundtracks — the kind of background music that subtly lets you know that the cheerleader is probably not going to emerge from that cellar shaking her pomps — is something that he very skilfully manages to transfer to his photos. Does he want to give his would-be audience any advice before looking at his photos? "I don't know!" he says, "Nothing, I suppose, I wouldn't say anything. I don't want to condition them". I think that pretty much sums Ais up: he creates because it's fun and as long as he is doing what he loves, the audience just fades into the background.

Crayons and glue

Antía Moure and José Ramon definitely have one thing in common. Like the Basque photographer, this 26 year old isn't motivated by telling a story but, in her own words, by pure curiosity. Antía sees the objective of her work *I'll Remember All of You Too* as one and the same as life: to "stay alive". She sees the image as the "glue that sticks fragments together" and a way of sharing her experience of life with the person who is viewing her photo. It is a confessional, and a way of reaching out to the things she sees as most essential in life — love, family and her strong Galician roots. Her only techniques are "intuition" and a "fistful of crayons", something that contrasts with the animated photo-nerd discussions of shutter speed and gelatine emulsions I had with her contemporaries. Antía turned out to be a good way to confront my own artistic prejudices; her photos resist categorisation and I found it hard to relate my conversation with her to the images contained in her collection. To me, the photos, which are gentle shots of inanimate objects accompanied by phrases seemingly pulled out of the air, are extremely hard to understand and even her detailed, friendly explanation did little to shine any light. With Palviranta and Ais, it is easy to relate to their photos; Harri is telling a story and José is playing with his medium. Antía... well, who knows? She says that she doesn't really meet her audience, so she has no expectations of them. Maybe it's me that has too many expectations of her; after all, the only thing that Antía says she wants is for us to enjoy her exhibition.



Inanimate objects feature in Antía's photography

Photo: Antía Moure

PHotoEspaña

When: 4 June-27 July

Where: Multiple locations, in both public spaces and private galleries. See www.phedigital.com for specific details or tel: 91 360 13 20.

Price: All free, except exhibitions in the Museo de Bellas Artes, Museo de América, Museo Reina Sofía and Circo Price — these venues have an admission fee. Encuentros and Campus (workshops and presentations) must be reserved in advance.